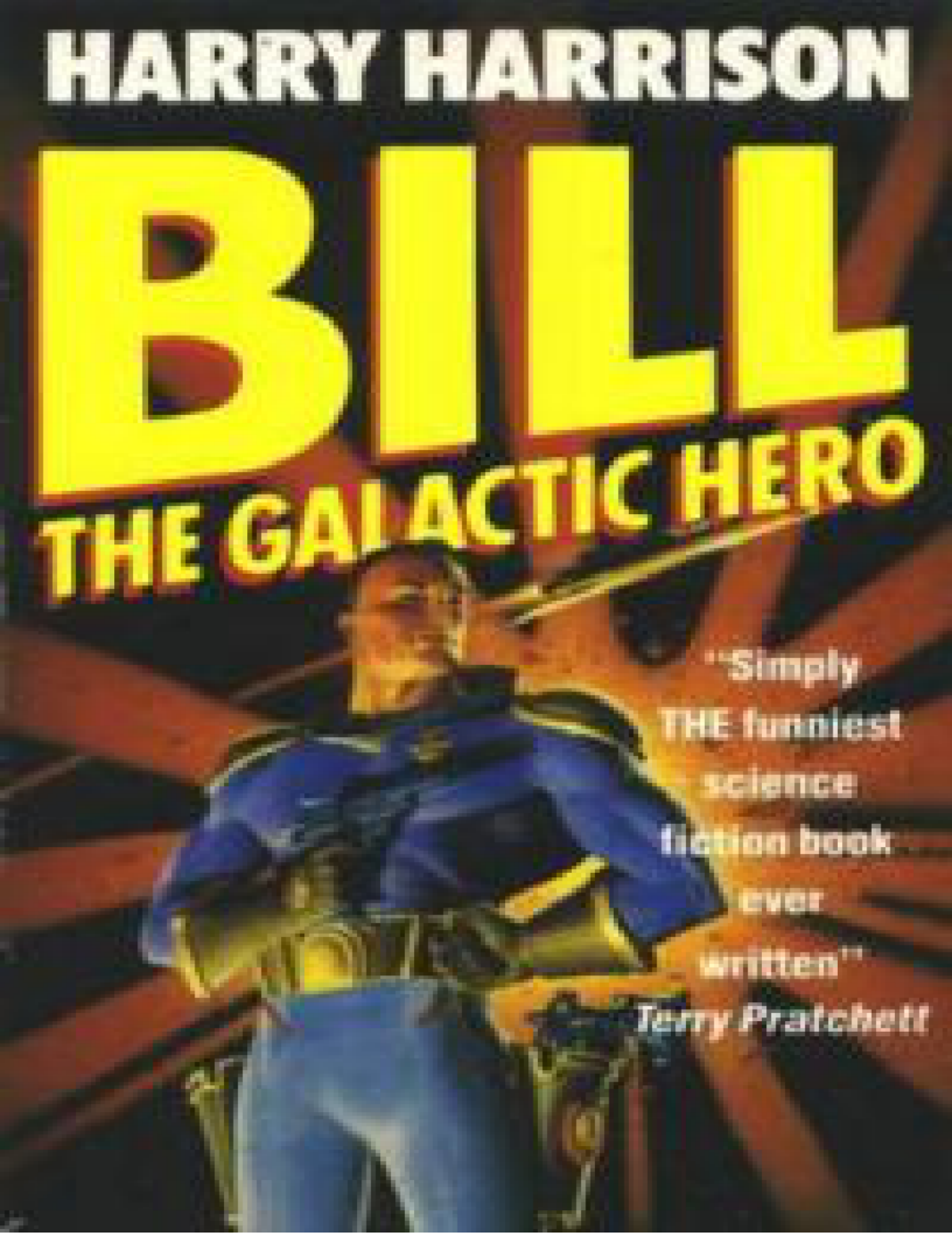
HARRY HARRISON

BILL THE GALACTIC HERO



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- BILL THE GALACTIC HERO’S HAPPY HOLIDAY

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It was a big bribe, a full bottle of DrainO-the Drunkard's Delight, 180 proof and strong enough to etch glass. But knowing this man's Army — or any Man's Army — Bill did not slip it to the Duty Sergeant until he had actually seen his name posted on the leave roster.

This was it! His first R&R ever. His lips lifted in an unaccustomed smile, a drop of saliva on each fang, as he read his orders.

Now hear this. At 0324 hours you will be taken in the company of other R&Rs to the luxurious Holiday Island of Anthrax where you will Enjoy sun, sand, *etc.* Not enjoying is punishable by death ….

His eyes were so misted with simple pleasure that he could read no further. He would enjoy the sun and sand-and even learn to like the *etc.*

Promptly at 0324 the following morning nothing happened, for this was the military way. Bill, and the other lucky Troopers sat buckled into their knobbed-steel seats in the hover-jumper for over two hours until, prompted by some secret signal, the pilot started the engines and the hovercraft, lifted by its mighty fans, floated across the beach to the ocean beyond.

And hurtled a hundred feet into the air — and crashed back to the sea.

"Accident! We're doomed!" Bill shouted as his teeth clashed together and his head was slammed down onto his spine.

"Shut your gob, bowbhead," grated the Sergeant in the seat next to him-just as there was another horrendous collision. "Civilian hovercraft hover. This is the military version that jumps as well. To dodge enemy fire."

"And crush everyone inside at the same time?"

"That's right, bowb-boy. You're learning."

After a lifetime of soaring and crashing there was a sudden stillness. Broken only by the moans of the castrated, crunched and crumbled Troopers.

"Disembark!" the loudspeakers grated. "Last one off gets latrine duty for the week."

Sobbing and moaning the happy holiday makers crawled and stumbled to the exit, fought their way free of this hideous form of transport. Staggered and fell onto the sandy shore.

"This sand is black," Bill mumbled.

“Of course it is,” the Sergeant said sadistically. “Because this is a volcanic island and lava is black. Fall in for roll call!”

As punctuation to his words there was an orgasmic rumble in the ground, which shook beneath their feet like a dog scratching fleas, and they looked in horror as the top of a nearby mountain spewed out smoke and a few clods of flying stone.

“Are we getting our R&R on an active volcano?” Bill asked.

“Where else in the military,” the Sergeant said not unreasonably. “Shout out when you hear your name. Aardvark… “

They stood in the burning tropical sun-that is those who didn’t collapse with heatstroke — until the Sergeant reached Zzowski. Only then did they march in staggering formation into the jungle.

It was a long climb up to the R&R barracks. Made even longer by the truckloads of officers that roared by them, laughing gaily, waving emptying bottles and giving them the finger. They could only plod on in insulting silence.

It was dusk before they reached the summit. Here the road split; a sign reading OFFICERS ONLY pointed to the right. Ahead of them fumaroles steamed out clouds of sulfur dioxide and other poisonous chemicals. There was still enough light to reveal that the trade winds blew the clouds off to the left. Shuffling, wheezing, coughing, crying they found the way to their holiday bungalows, downwind from the volcano of course, and dropped onto the rock-hard bunks.

“Gee this is fun!” Bill said, smiling through his tears, then lifted his arm to ward off the flying boots that came his way.

Even these hardened Troopers found it difficult to fall asleep with the seismic rumblings and acrid VOG, Volcanic Smog. But if they hadn’t learned to sleep under these, or worse, conditions they would all have been long-since dead of fatigue. Within minutes the zizzing of snores, and death-rattles of acid-eaten throats, made live the night. Until the lights gashed on and the sergeant burst through the door bellowing loudly.

“An attack! A Chinger attack!”

They groaned awake, groped for their boots, until the sergeant added, “They’re attacking the officer’s quarters!”

Groans were replaced by cheers as they hurled their boots away and climbed back into the sack. Only to be stirred out again as the sergeant shot holes in the ceiling.

“I share the feeling,” he growled empathetically. “But they may hit us next. To arms.”

This reasoned argument, appealing to their sense of survival-not the officers-sent them to the gun lockers.

Bill, dressed only in natty orange underpants and boots, grabbed up an ion rifle, checked that it was fully charged, then joined the

others on the porch to enjoy the fun. Explosions and screams of pain penetrated the clouds of drifting VOG.

"Hear that? Must of got a dozen of the bowbers that time!"

"And I almost volunteered for OCS!"

It was good, clean fun and Bill, smiling with heartfelt pleasure, wandered out onto the grass to see if he could get a better view of the entertainment.

"Psst, Bill-over here," someone whispered from behind the bushes.

"Who's that?" he said suspiciously. "I don't know anyone here."

"But I know you, Bill. We were shipmates on the battleship Forniqueteur, the grand old lady of the fleet."

"So what?"

"So I got a bottle of Plutonian Panther Pee I don't want to share with the others."

"Good buddy! Yes, I do remember you now!"

Bill walked around the bush and there was just enough moonlight filtering through the clouds of gunge for him to make out the tiny form of a Chinger standing there.

"To arms!"

Bill cried, lifting his rifle.

A small but powerful hand pulled it from his grasp. The Chinger bounded high and a hard fist cracked Bill's jaw, dropping him, half-stunned, to the ground.

"Come on, Bill — you remember me. I've saved your life more than once."

"Bgr? Bgr the Chinger?"

"You got that in one — after all, how many Chingers do you know? We staged this raid as a diversion-"

"You mean you're not killing the officers?" he asked, unhappily.

"Of course we are. Now shut up and let me finish. A diversion so I could get through to you. We need your help …."

"Do you think that I am a traitor to the human race!"

"Yes. You are a trained Trooper who will do anything to save his own hide. Right?"

"Right. But traitoring doesn't come cheap. What's the pay?"

"A lifetime subscription to the Booze of the Month Club. Their motto-a barrel first means you'll never die of thirst. There is no mention, however, of hobnailed livers."

"Done. Who do I have to kill?"

"Nobody. And you don't have to be a traitor either. That was just my little trap to expose what bowbheads you humans are. Now let's get out of here before the diversion ends."

Bgr led the way to an ornamental fountain crowned by an

immense fish spewing out water. The water stopped when he twisted the fish's tail and a door opened in its side.

"In," Bgr ordered.

"What is it? A miniature spaceship disguised as a fountain?"

"Well it's not a subway train. Move — before we're spotted."

A sudden spattering of bullets at his heels sent Bill diving through the opening. He was bashed flat by acceleration and when he finally struggled to his feet Bgr was at the controls; stars punctured the darkness outside the window. The Chinger stabbed down a button and the stars began to shrink as the spacer's Bloater Drive fired up.

"Good," Bgr said, spinning around in his chair. "Have a cigar and I'll tell you what's up."

Bill took one of the proffered cigars and lit it. Bgr ate the rest of them and belched contentedly.

"Different metabolisms. What we are on is a rescue mission."

"Kidnapped maidens?"

"Hardly. A Chinger of course. Trapped in his ship when the engines were shot out. He's very important to us-"

"Why?"

"If I told you that you would sell him out to the highest bidder. Let's just say important. Spring him and you are drunk for life."

"Why can't you do it yourself?"

"For the simple reason, bowb-brain, that I am not human. Mgr, which happens to be his name, is imprisoned on the highly militarized planet of Parra'Noya. Any disguise would be instantly penetrated. You, however, are disgustingly human and can boldly go where we can't."

"I want an advance on my salary," Bill said, beginning to be worried.

"Why not. You can travel just as well smashed. Nothing could possibly improve or hinder your conversational abilities. Here."

"Here" was a suspiciously green flask of liquid labeled in an unknown language. None of which would deter a determined boozehead in search of escape. The first mouthful tasted preposterously foul and Bill could feel steam leaking out of his ears. But the more he drank the better it tasted and he was soon twanging a tusk with contentment as he slipped into oblivion.

"Disgusting. Chingers don't drinker have BO."

The clang of mighty bells awoke Bill, groaning. It was some time before he realized that they were inside his head.

He needed both hands to pry one eye open; it clanged shut and he groaned even more loudly as the light seared and sizzled through his skull.

"Appalling," Bgr sneered as he plunged a hypodermic into Bill's

arm. Whatever it was took effect almost instantly and the symptoms of the galaxy-sized hangover began to fade. As the blear faded from his eyes Bill saw a grizzled Admiral of the Fleet standing before him. He snapped to attention and saluted with his two right arms.

Surprisingly, the Admiral did the same. Much rapid blinking revealed the fact that he was looking at himself in the mirror.

"My true rank at last," he simpered, strutting and rattling his medals.

"Come off it. You aren't intelligently qualified to even make Private First Class. Now listen to instructions and try to remember them. They are very complicated. Almost as complicated as learning to be a fuse tender."

"That wasn't easy — but I did it!"

"Indeed. Listen. Your instructions have been mnemonically implanted in your subconscious. To access your orders you must say the word `harumph' aloud."

"Is that all?"

"That's it. Do you think that you can master all the complications and pitfalls of these complex instructions?"

"Harumph."

Bill said, then hooked his thumbs into his gunbelt and began to speak in resounding tones. "I say, my good man, don't you realize that you are in the presence of a Grand Admiral of the fleet …."

"Unharumph!" Bgr called out and Bill staggered back.

"Did I say that?"

"You did. The implants work. Now the battle starts."

"What battle?"

"The staged battle, bowb-brain, from which you will escape in a lifeboat that will take you to Parra'Noya."

Bgr hit the communication button and the imaged form of another green, four-armed Chinger appeared on the screen.

"Tydsmnx," Bgr said.

"Mrtnzl," the other answered and vanished from the screen. "A human like you would have to talk for five minutes to express what we said. A remarkably compact language, Chingerian."

"Doesn't sound nice."

"Who asked you? Get over to the door, because your transport of delight is here."

A crunched and burnt lifeboat drifted into view and clanged against their hull as the airlocks lined up.

"Move it!" Bgr ordered and Bill moved out of the fountain spaceship and into the other. He strapped himself into the pilot's seat and was just reaching for the controls when Bgr's voice boomed in his ears.

“Don’t touch anything, bowb-brains. This thing is remotely controlled. Have a good day-” The Chinger’s voice was wiped out by the roar of rockets as the lifeboat blasted forward. Straight into the ravening maw of a full-fledged space battle. Bill shrieked as guns and spacemines exploded and ravened on all sides.

The little rocket blasted through the engagement and out the other side-heading for the blue globe of a rapidly expanding planet. As gravity grabbed onto it the engine cut out and Bill continued to moan in terror as they dropped uncontrollably towards the clouds below.

The military base, bulging with guns and turrets, rushed towards them at an accelerating pace. But, at the last possible microsecond, the parachute snapped out and the lifeboat settled gently in the middle of a drillfield. The door ground open, Bill patted his newly-gray hair smooth, hauled his stomach up into his chest in the best military manner and stamped out.

“Hold it right there spy — or you’ll be fried into dog-food!”

A snarling sentry stood outside with his heatray leveled at Bill’s gut, his finger twitching on the trigger.

“Urggle!”

Bill said.

“What?”

“I mean — Burble!”

His skin grayed to match his hair as he realized he had forgotten the word of command! “I say-what’s going on here?”

a General in full body armor said as he clanged up.

“Spacer landed, sir. This madman got out. Can’t talk.”

“Nonsense. Can’t you see that he is an officer? Other ranks are mad, officers are eccentric.”

He turned to Bill and saluted. “Welcome to Parra’Noya, Admiral.”

“Eeek,” Bill eeked.

“Indeed,” the general said, bulging his eyes, not knowing what to say, “Harumph,” he finally harumphed.

“That’s it!”

Bill jovialated. “Harumph! Quite a pleasure to meet you General. Bit of a space battle out there. Few thousand ships destroyed, got a few of the buggers on the other side as well.”

“Can’t make an omelet without breaking eggs.”

“Quite. I nipped into this lifeship when my battleship blew up. Now I suggest you show me a bit of hospitality and discipline this soldier for pointing a weapon at a superior officer.”

“Of course. You — give me that weapon and turn yourself in to the MPs for two years in a labor battalion.

“Dismissed.”

Sobbing with despair the soldier staggered away. The officers,

now good chums, headed hand in hand for the bar where they raised glasses of vintage champagne in jolly toasting.

"To your fine military planet," Bill smarmed. "Long may it reign."

"To your fine space navy — long may it destroy!"

Bill drained his glass, belched, and nodded happily as it was refilled. "This is Parra'Noya, isn't it?"

"Indeed it is."

"I seem to remember a space-o-gram that came in just before the ship exploded. Something about a prisoner you had …."

"That will be our captive Chinger!"

"I say — no one has ever captured a Chinger before."

"That's because no one is as militaristically sadistically warlike as we are. Like to see the bugger?"

"Is that his name?"

"Almost. I believe it is Mgr."

"Well lead on, old bean. Can I help you torture the creature or something?"

"Nice of you to offer. I'll see what can be arranged."

They finished the bottle, lit cigars, then strolled deep into the fortress. Guards clashed their weapons at attention as they passed. Electronic gates swung open and squads of troops trotted by with presented arms. Deeper and deeper they went until the metal walls gave way to damp stone. Furtive rodents rustled away and even the guards were covered with mold and spiderwebs. One last sealed gate was unsealed and resealed and they stood before a barred door. The guard raised his weapon in a snappy salute and stepped aside. Bill looked in at the Chinger chained to the wall with massive metal shackles.

"I thought they were bigger," he said.

"Big, small, green, too many arms, doesn't matter. They are the enemy and shall be destroyed."

"Hear, hear. I say, what is that unusual weapon the guard is holding?"

"A new invention. Shackle-ray projector. Sends out rings of energy that enwrap the victim with unbreakable bonds of paralyzing radiation."

"Sounds wizard. Might I see it?"

Even before permission was given Bill took hold of the gun, reversed it, looked down the muzzle. Reversed it again and shot the guard and the General. They fell screaming and writhing into unconsciousness, wrapped in purple flame. Bill looked through the bars at the Chinger and spoke.

"Grtzz?"

"Zimtz! And I'm might glad to see you, vulgar human bearer of

succor and sent by my hive-mate Bgr. You can now unharumph."

At this command Bill's imposed personality vanished and his teeth began chattering with fear. "We're good as dead! Deep in the enemy stronghold!"

"Shut up," Mgr kindly suggested as he seized his chains and snapped them easily. "You won't see a bowby human doing this. Or this," he added as he bent the cell bars into loops and stepped out into the passageway. "Did you see any robots around?"

"Why?"

"Just answer and don't try to think with your limited capacity. Robots — remember? Metal men with wheels and glass eyes."

"Yes, I think, maybe. A janitor robot down the hall."

"Perfect."

The Chinger jumped over the unconscious General and went to the control panel beside the closed portal.

"Harumph," he said as he pushed the button and the door opened a crack. Bill stamped forward and spoke through the crack.

"I say, guards, step in here for a moment."

As the door opened wider he seized up the ray gun and added some more numb bodies to the growing pile. Mgr stayed well out of sight as he said "Unharumph."

Bill vibrated and moaned with fear again.

"Knock that off or I'll leave you here for certain death and dismemberment. Do what I say and you stand a chance of getting out of here in one piece or more. Get that robot in here."

Bill moaned but went. The Chinger was his only chance.

The robot was mopping the hall but stopped when he called to it.

"You, robot, come here."

"Me robot already here," it grated with metallic stupidity.

"You-robot — put'em down mop. Roll to big human chief."

"Me-robot — do what big chief tell it."

Clanking and muttering mechanically it rolled through the door and stopped when the Chinger jumped onto its shoulder and opened the access plate in its head.

"Klinkle!" it said as Mgr tore out handfuls of wire and machinery and threw them to the floor. When he had made enough room he climbed inside and slammed the plate closed behind him.

"Let's roll!" the revitalized robot said. "And you better Harumph again since you are pretty useless in the quivering coward persona. Say it!"

"Harumph!"

Bill quavered — then took a brace. "Shall we proceed, dear nest-mate of mine? I assume you have a plan of escape."

"Indeed I do," the robot grated as it grabbed up its mop. "You

lead the way and I'll roll behind you. We have to go up thirty stories to the top level. I spotted some aerial transport there when they carried me by."

The guard at the next portal widened his eyes as Bill approached. "You do know that you are being followed by a janitorbot?"

"Am I? I thought I heard a rattling."

As Bill spoke the robot rolled past him — and crashed his mop down on the guard's head. "Time for you to change persona," the Chingerbot said as it stripped off the guard's uniform. Bill nodded agreement and peeled down. Swift seconds later guard and robot rolled on. They had just reached the hellevator shaft when the alarm clanged over their heads.

"They've caught on!" Bill shouted.

"Up the Chingers!" the robot bellowed and tore open the hellevator doors. The moving ladders inside were bright red. Metal hand and human hand grabbed out as one and they were quickly whisked upward. At the top of the shaft the door opened and the soldiers outside fired their guns all at the same time.

"It's a good thing Chinger and electronic reflexes are faster than your sluggish human ones," Mgr said, slamming the doors shut an instant before the guns ravened. The metal doors glowed hot. "Let's try the floor below."

It was a race against time, a desperate bid for survival. Every man's hand was turned against them — women's as well they discovered when a gun-wielding WAAC singed their bums as they raced by.

Words cannot reveal the terrors they faced that day. The close encounters of a fourth kind, the skin of their teeth well flayed, the cliff-hangers well hung. It was only minutes but it seemed like hours before they stumbled through one last door and into the rain outside. Singed, scalded, bent and more than a little mutilated, Bill patted the sparks from his trousers while the robot raised its one remaining arm to open the plate in its head. It clanged limply to the ground as the Chinger jumped free.

"Unharumph," Mgr said. "And, if possible, let us not do that again. Now, if you can stop clattering your teeth together in that disgusting manner, you can look about and tell me where we are."

"In the rain…."

"Brilliant. The entire human race to pick from and Bgr sends me one with the intellect of a brain-dead mouse. Listen, stupid, you are human and I, as is obvious, am not. So look about and let me know where we are."

"I've never been here before."

"I know that. But bulge your eyes, make a guess. All I know about

humans is what I read in reports. I may be head of the CIA, Chinger Intelligence Assessment, but I have never been on a human planet before. What's that?"

"The town garbage dump. So you're pretty high up, huh?"

"Nobody higher. I run the war and have been doing a damn fine job of it. And if you try to tell anybody who I am you'll be dead before the first word leaves your lips.

"What is garbage?"

"Things people throw out."

"Good. Let's take a look."

They skulked rapidly through the rain, from one place of concealment to the other. Finally hiding behind a heap of broken cogwheels as a rumbling sound grew louder, coming towards them.

"Peek out and look," Mgr ordered. "What is it?"

"A garbage truck. What else did you expect to find in a garbage dump?"

"How many humans in it?"

"None. It's a robot garbage truck."

"You have just made my day, simple human. Let's climb aboard."

Sodden and weary they climbed up the cab and slammed the door shut behind them.

"No humans allowed," the robot driver grated out.

"Against law, me no like, krrkkk-' It krrkked its last as Mgr tore its head off and pushed it aside.

"Drive," he said to Bill. "That is I assume you can operate this vehicle?"

"A truck's a truck," Bill said sanguinely, kicking it into gear, revving the engine — and plowing backwards into a mountain of garbage. "Though sometimes, ha-ha, it takes a second or two to work out the controls."

"Well take a second or four and try not to do that again. We Chingers have most delicate senses of smell."

Bill fiddled with the controls and finally got them working. Put the thing into forward and rumbled out of the garbage dump. The rain was letting up and they could see the fortress behind them, green fields off to the side. Mgr peeked out of a hole he had punched in the door.

"That way-towards the jungle."

"Those are farms."

"Spare me the linguistic lesson and head for the hills. I want to be as far away from the troops as we can get before calling for help."

They rumbled on and Bill began to master the controls.

When a squad of tanks came their way he stopped and, using the extensible arms, he actually emptied some garbage cans so as not to

arouse suspicion.

"Pretty good," he said proudly as the tanks vanished with a great slurping of churned-up mud.

"Would have been a lot better," Mgr sneered, "if you had got the garbage into the hole on top instead of dumping it into the street."

"It's not that easy," Bill sulked. "Do you think you could do better?"

"Drive," the Chinger said wearily. "Never let it be known that I have debated the merits of garbage dumping with a renegade human."

It was dusk before they reached a spot that suited Mgr's needs. A rocky patch in the hills, far from human habitation. While Bill was driving he had dismantled the driving robot and used some of its spare parts to build two complicated electronic devices. He plugged one in the cigar lighter socket and waved it around.

"What's that?" Bill asked.

"Detector detector for detecting detectors."

"What does it do?"

"I have always been nice to little Chingers and have helped old Chingers across the street — so what have I done to deserve you? Since you must know I am trying to find out if I can send my signal without the enemy knowing about it. And I can — so I plug this device in."

"What are you doing now?"

"Calling home obviously. There; the signal has gone out and we should get some results pretty soon ….

"It was sooner than that. His words were drowned out in the roar of landing jets as a hulking black craft dropped out of the sky and set down next to the truck. Mgr was on the ground in a single bound with Bill right behind him.

The airlock started to open and a microphone dropped out on a cord.

"Bgr I presume," Mgr enthused into the microphone.

A squad of combat marines dropped out of the bottom of the ship, blast rifles aimed. The door opened and a General with seven stars on his shoulders came smiling forth.

"Not Bgr," he said. "But General Saddam, head of Military Intelligence."

"Save me!" Bill shouted and ran behind the General to the safety of the blast rifles. "This enemy made me his prisoner but I have found out his secret. His name is Mgr and he is head of the CIA. Their top intelligence agency."

"Good work soldier. I suspected this Chinger from the very beginning, he was too easy to capture. And you have proven me right. My plans have worked perfectly!"

“No, General,” Mgr sneered greenly. “My plans have worked perfectly. Harumph!”

Bill whipped the General’s pistol from his holster and ground it into the General’s neck as he jumped to put the officer’s bulk between him and the gun-toting marines.

“Hey, guys!” he shouted. “If you shoot me you shoot the General, which would not look good on your records.”

The marines stirred uneasily, some lowering their guns.

Their indecision was decided when with a great roar another black ship descended from the sky with its gun turrets swivelling. A blast of energy seared the ground before the troops and they hastily threw away their rifles.

“You can’t do this!” the General roared, and tried to grab his pistol back from Bill who easily kept him at bay.

“Well done,” Bgr said stepping out of the open part of the ship. “You were right about this one, Mgr.”

“Thanks, Bgr.”

Bgr made a sudden leap and seized the gun from Bill. “Unharumph,” he said.

“You almost broke my fingers off!”

“Tough. But for a moron you did a great job, Bill.

“Get into the ship. And you, General, right behind him. File for a pension because your retirement has just begun.”

“You trapped me. This whole charade was just so you could get to me?”

“You bet our sweet patootie, General. Your side was getting too good. We figured out that someone really intelligent had gotten into the military and we couldn’t put up with that. The only way we can keep winning the war is by letting the military chain of command stand. With the stupidest rising to the top.”

A blast from the Chinger gun turret blew a hole through the other spacer and the marines fled for their lives. Mgr locked the General in chains as Bgr blasted them into the sky.

“You can drop me on some quiet planet, guys-okay?” Bgr shook his head no. “Sorry, Bill, there’s no discharge in the war. We need you in the Troopers. Maybe you too can be a General someday.”

“Will I still get the Booze of the Month Club?”

“Sorry about that as well. It was but a figment of my imagination to tantalize you with.”

“Then what do I get?”

“The rest of your R&R. All the officers are in the hospital with the sergeants taking care of them. We left a space freighter filled with every kind of alcoholic beverage known to mankind — as well as some unknown. All of your mates have imparted on a monumental

binge and we know that they would like you to join them."

"Traitor!" the General hissed. "Your name will live in infamy!"

"I suppose it will," Bill sighed. "Though it won't if you don't tell them."

"Count on that," Mgr said.

"Well, in that case, you better pull out the stops. I don't want the party to go on too long without me."

Author's Note: On the island of Hawaii there is an active volcano that has been erupting for eight years. It produces 1600 metric tons of sulfur dioxide, and other chemicals, per day. There is a civilian hotel upwind from the fumaroles. And there is a Military Rest Camp downwind, washed by the clouds of VOG. How art doth mimic life ….